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WESTERN HEMISPHERE

Argentina: Admiral Massera's Activities

Many Argentines are intrigued by the activities of Admiral Massera, a member of the three-man governing military junta and commander of the Navy. Because Massera has been a frequent critic of President Videla and has done a great deal of politicking outside the junta, speculation is rife that he is trying to undermine Videla, perhaps with the hope of ultimately becoming President himself. In nearly two years of such activity, Massera has not come visibly closer to that goal—if indeed such is his intention—but he has at times been a serious hindrance to the President.

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Massera has a complex personality, and the fluidity of Argentine politics—which obliges any political figure to change tactics frequently—makes it doubly difficult to assess his intentions. There is no doubt, however, that Massera is ambitious, is highly regarded by the Navy men he commands, and has at least some civilian following. Because he is intelligent and politically shrewd—perhaps more so than Videla—it would be wrong to dismiss the admiral's machinations as futile.

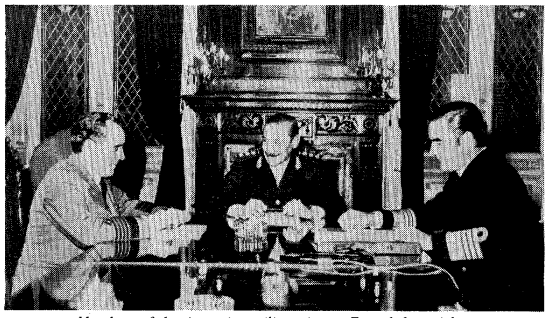
Massera is politically active outside the military as well as within it. He has been making political contacts among a variety of civilian groups, but this is not unusual for an Argentine military man, even if he is not seeking to propel himself into higher office.

Even while publicly condemning Peronism and organized labor for aggravating Argentina's problems, Massera has increased his contacts with the very Peronists and labor chiefs he attacks. Again, the contradiction is not unusual in the context of Argentina's politics.

In recent weeks, he has been reported to be widening his contacts to include Jewish and civil rights organizations, and may also be connected with a newly created civic group said to be designed to enlist public support for him. Lest such pursuits mark Massera as a would-be grass-roots politician, he is careful to mollify his critics in the military by frequently attacking what he calls the "populism" of Videla and the President's chief supporter, Army Chief of Staff Viola.

The Human Rights Issue

Massera appears to be trying to exploit US concern for human rights. A story in the *Washington Post* on 27 January reported his assertions that he would halt human rights abuses if he became president and that he was eager to talk with President Carter to stress his concern for human rights. Here, the admiral is being particularly self-serving; the record on his human rights position is clearly contrary to what he now professes.



Members of the Argentine military junta. From left to right, Lieutenant General Agosti, President Videla, and Admiral Massera.

has consistently indicated that he has been an obstacle to Videla's own attempts to ease political repression.

Almost from the advent of the junta nearly two years ago, Massera has been taking potshots at Videla both publicly and privately. At times, he has withheld Navy cooperation, as when he refused to provide Videla with a list of persons detained by the Navy.

That the admiral has the sympathy of at least some military men outside the Navy is probably best evidenced by the fact that Videla has never seriously explored ways to unseat Massera. At the same time, Massera appears to have a good sense of how hard he can press at any particular moment, and when he should back off and let the dust settle.

Massera has aimed his criticism at both the style and substance of Videla's policies. When the President proclaims the need for "dialogue" with representative civilian groups, Massera accuses Videla of capitulating to the very forces that created the chaos that obliged the military to intervene in 1976. Massera has asserted all along that Videla is not harsh enough in the treatment either of leftists or of corrupt Peronists and labor leaders. Massera appears to be behind the rough treatment the Navy metes out to those it detains in the campaign against terrorism and corruption.

Massera has so far avoided being branded a chronic malcontent. This is partly because he does not keep up a steady barrage, but it is also because he picks with care the issues he seeks to exploit. He focuses on problems of concern to all Argentines and comes across as a man who has serious thoughts on the major issues of the day. Videla and his supporters cannot easily put aside Massera's call for no-holds-barred repression of terrorists. Nor is it easy to ignore the admiral's criticism of the economic austerity program, which, he points out, discriminates against working people by placing restraints on wages but not on prices.

Promoter of Navy Interests

Massera remains acutely aware that his main constituency is still the Navy, and he is an active promoter of its interests. The Army has always been by far the most powerful and influential of the services, but Massera has worked hard to secure for the Navy an important role in major issues. Thus, he has actively involved the Navy in the counterinsurgency campaign and portrayed his service as much more disposed than the Army to get the job done quickly and thoroughly. Massera also has the Navy in the thick of the process of drafting a new basic law defining the ultimate political role of labor, a key political force during the Peron regimes but now in virtual limbo.

It is more difficult to assess how Massera views his and the Navy's interests in the context of Argentina's 200-mile territorial sea claim and in its disputes with Chile and the UK. Massera certainly realizes that such issues present an opportunity to expand Navy influence by stressing to his countrymen the need for a stronger Navy to back up a strong stance.

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Massera, at the very least, aims to keep himself in the limelight and to maintain as wide a spectrum of contacts as possible so that whether the political climate becomes more or less authoritarian, he will have proper presidential credentials. He intends also to make life as difficult as he can for Videla and his supporters so that the President—and the Army—will be seen in the worst possible light and he and the Navy, by comparison, will look good.

Massera is probably not actively seeking to bring down the government. The Army is simply too powerful—and relatively united—to permit it. Massera realizes that the Army would use any sign of a conspiracy to discredit him and the Navy. It is one thing for Massera to criticize or to say that he could do a better job of governing Argentina; it is quite another to try to subvert a government that is, after all, not widely unpopular and is viewed as seriously taking on, however imperfectly, the tasks that need doing.

If Massera indeed hopes to become President, his best hope lies in building the foundation for an eventual civilian candidacy—something he is clearly doing. The chances for an early return to civilian rule are slim, however, and Massera will have a long wait. During that time, the national political situation could, and probably will, change significantly and Massera could well disappear from the political scene.

For now, Massera—52 years old—is facing mandatory retirement from active duty this fall. The other junta members also are subject to mandatory military retirement, but considerably later. When he retires, Massera will lose the power that comes from being commander in chief of the nation's number-two military service. While he still retains the prerogatives of his position, he can be expected to cut as wide a swath as he can.

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